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### Using Apologies to Strengthen Relationships, Business Culture and Business Results

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## Using Apologies to Strengthen Relationships, Business Culture and Business Results

### Abstract

One of the most important investments we can make as business owners is in creating effective business cultures and developing strong relationships between colleagues. This article highlights how using apologies can help you make progress on both fronts.

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# Using Apologies to Strengthen Relationships, Business Culture and Business Results

CAROL WITTMAYER, Ed.D.

One of the most important investments we can make as business owners is in creating effective business cultures and developing strong relationships between colleagues. This article highlights how using apologies can help you make progress on both fronts.

Businesses leaders want to have teams that are able to work together and challenge each other to make the best possible decisions for businesses. It is inevitable that as teammates work together, they will make mistakes or upset each other for a variety of reasons. Having teammates who are good at apologizing can help organizations reach their goals of having teams that can be honest with each other and also help them to feel good about themselves. At the individual level, giving a well-delivered apology can make you feel better about yourself and when you receive a well-delivered apology, it can make you feel more connected to the apologizer.

At the team and organizational level, many positive results can come from having teammates comfortable giving and receiving effective apologies. Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson has found that the most cohesive and effective teams are the ones that report the most mistakes, because they don't feel the need to bury evidence, point fingers, or avoid ownership of problems. Being able to effectively give and receive feedback (including apologies), even when it is hard, takes vulnerability and is a skill

that takes time to develop. And like all things, role modeling from leaders



**Dr. Carol Wittmeyer**

and practice on the part of all teammates helps everyone become better at apologizing. The art and science of apologizing might be more difficult when the team members are family members where oftentimes there are longer and more complex dynamics. Everyone knows stories where family members hold grudges for years, even generations, so part of any discussion on apologizing needs to include the important benefits of forgiveness.

## What is an Apology?

An apology is a statement that shows one feels remorse for actions taken that have hurt someone else.

## Why Apologize?

In their book, *Sorry, Sorry, Sorry, The*

*Case for Good Apologies*, authors Marjorie Ingall and Susan McCarthy tell us that, "apologies civilize us. In our day-to-day dealings and in the wider social sphere, they make things better. It's human nature to sometimes disappoint or betray others, but saying you're sorry – and doing it well – has the near-miraculous, super-heroic power to heal." They suggest that apologies show wisdom and honor. A good apology can result in improved lives and spirits of all those touched. It makes the giver feel release and redemption and the receiver feel seen and experience justice. Everyone can feel healed when apologies go well.

The experts suggest six steps (and a possible additional one) to an effective apology. Let's use an example: Sarah (the apologizer) who is the sales manager, did not provide a quote for an important customer wanting shoes for employees in the timeframe that was agreed upon to her colleague Ann, who is the customer contact.

- 1. Say you're sorry.** Psychologist Harriet Lerner said that "I'm sorry" are "the two most powerful words in the English language." The purpose is to apologize about a situation in which you were a prime actor to acknowledge that you (even partially) caused the thing that happened. The apology needs to be to the people harmed, not a vague group like sometimes we hear famous folks (politicians and celebrities) exclaim, apologizing to

anyone that was harmed. So, in the described case, Sarah would apologize to Ann. And depending on the situation, the customer.

- 2. For what you did.** Be specific. Saying that you apologize for “a situation” is not effective. You should be clear about behaviors, for example, “I did not keep my word to you about when I would get back to our key customer”. Sarah needs to apologize for what

timelines in the future.

- 6. Offer to make up for it.** Sarah could offer to reach out to the customer to apologize as well.

**There is a 6.5 step: Listen.** If the other person wants to say something, let the person do that and listen intently without interruption. That said, it is important to respect the other person's choices of if and how they will respond. So, if Ann does not want to respond, that should be respected.

**At the team and organizational level, many positive results can come from having teammates comfortable giving and receiving effective apologies. Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson has found that the most cohesive and effective teams are the ones that report the most mistakes, because they don't feel the need to bury evidence, point fingers, or avoid ownership of problems.**

she did (dropped the ball with the customer), not how Ann reacted (got upset). Saying that you are sorry you upset someone should be avoided as the goal is to focus on what your actions were.

- 3. Show you understand why it was bad.** Sarah should share that by not completing the work on time, as told to Ann, that was disrespectful and left Ann in a bad position with the customer. Sarah should consider all the ways that Ann was offended by Sarah's behavior.
- 4. Only explain if you need to; don't make excuses.** It is important to stick to the relevant facts and not distract with excuses such as Sarah was not feeling well that day or something else was more important.
- 5. Say why it won't happen again.** Sarah should assure Ann that she will not be late with agreed upon

## How to Apologize

There are many ways to apologize. Whatever choice is made, it's important – and respectful – to not expect the receiver to respond. So, for written options, it is appropriate to end with a few words such as, “you do not have to respond”. Whatever your choice, think of how it will help you deliver it and help the receiver assimilate it.

- **Handwritten Letter** – Letters can be a very effective choice. Most folks do not write letters in this high technology environment and the effort alone suggests the importance of the apology. There is no mumbling or rambling in this choice.
- **Email** – Emails can be effective if the message is long.
- **Text** – In our digital age, texts can be a good option for smaller offensives.
- **Face-to-Face** – While apologizing face-to-face (in person or zoom),

this may be the most effective way to convey your message. It gives you the advantage of using verbal and non-verbal communication. However, it is important that the other person is able to walk away if needed. That is, it should not be done in a car where the receiver is the passenger. As mentioned, if the receiver does not want to respond, it is important to respect that.

## Deciding to Apologize or Not: Four Reasons Not to Apologize

If you cannot plan an apology to be well delivered or not sincere, it should not happen. Ingall and McCarthy suggest that there are four times when apologies do not make sense and could therefore make relationships worse. They include:

- 1. You don't mean it** – authenticity is important to an effective apology.
- 2. It would hurt another person** – such as when an apology could be interpreted as making the apologizer look superior.
- 3. The other person does not want to hear from you** – your message will not be received even if delivered.
- 4. The other person is demanding too many apologies** – such as when the other person refuses to forgive and does not let go of the issue.

## Receiving Apologies: Forgiving or Holding Grudges

For an apology to be effective, the receiver needs to accept it. Ingall and McCarthy discuss many reasons why forgiveness can be advocated including religious traditions. They cite research studies that suggest that choosing to forgive has many benefits including medical, such as lower blood pressure and heart rates. Holding on to anger can result in releasing more cortisol which

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can cause a variety of medical concerns. While we may not be able to control if or how others apologize to us, we can control forgiveness.

Apologies can be an effective way to build stronger relationships and business culture, one that encourages sincere

and timely feedback and solving problems as they occur. Taking steps to practice apologizing using the steps outlined in this article may help teammates become more successful at adding apologies as a tool for more productive and fulfilling relationships. ■

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